1: Tew E-4 (no date) 1950 FT7 Yao FT7

Birth

Birth takes place in the bush, some distance from the hamlet, in the presence of female relatives of the woman and of her husband. If the child is stillborn, or miscarried, it is buried in the bush. The husband and wife must abstain from sexual intercourse for some months, until a special ritual intercourse is performed. A man who breaks this taboo is liable to contract a fatal disease, *kwasaga*. Difficult births are attributed to: (*a*) a curse spoken by a matrilineal relative—this is made effective by the intervention of the ancestors, and to remove it it is necessary to perform a rite making clear that no malice is borne; (*b*) the adultery of the woman or her husband, in which case confession will save the woman from dying; and (*c*) sorcery.

If a child is born alive it is brought to the hut of the mother or one of her female relatives, where it is secluded until its naming ceremony, about six days later. Only after the naming is the child considered to be a member of society. A second child should not be born while the first is still suckling, i.e. for about two years. When the child is about four or five months old it is ritually immunized against the dangers of sexual activity, and the parents may resume relations. Elaborate magical precautions are taken to ensure the child's survival. Children sleep with their mother, the boys until they are old enough to go to the boys' dormitory, and the girls until marriage.[1]

Initiation

The yearly initiation ceremonies, *unyago*, are the principal cultural institution of the Yao. That for the boys, *lupanda*, is the most important, and may only take place under a chief or superior village headman, whereas a girls' initiation ceremony may take place under an ordinary headman. The right to hold a boys' initiation ceremony therefore becomes a mark of status which is jealously disputed.[2] The right is expressed as 'having a *cisolo*'. A *cisolo* is the small basket in which the special sacrificial flour is carried.

Yao carry out initiation between the ages of seven and eleven, whereas generally in East Africa it is postponed until puberty.[3] In response to requests from the headmen the chief appoints the time and place of the boys' initiation ceremony for a group of villages. It is held at the end of the dry season, before the bush is burned. Each initiate is accompanied by a sponsor, *nkamwali*, who may be a brother, uncle, or friend. Before they set out for the place appointed to be *lupanda*, they all assemble before the chief to be anointed with millet-flour specially prepared by his head wife. The word *lupanda* refers to a forked stick over which the sacrificial flour is poured. This stick is planted at the place of assembly, the *masakasa*. The boys, their sponsors, and the master of ceremonies, *m'mitiwa*, are accompanied with dancing as far as *masakasa* by their friends. The next day the initiates go to a spot in the bush, where the circumcision (formerly only an incision) is performed, and remain in the bush school, *ndagala*, for about two months, until the wounds are completely healed. The Yao circumcision rite is said not to have been introduced by the Arabs.[4]

During these weeks the boys are subjected to rigorous discipline and instructed in various skills and tribal lore. They sleep in long dormitory huts, with partitions dividing the boys of different villages from each other. The chief appoints the day for

[1] Watson, 1926, pp. 144–5.
[2] Stannus and Davey, 1913, p. 119.
[3] Duff, 1903, p. 312.
[4] Livingstone, 1874, p. 81.

2: Mitchell E-5 (1946-1949) 1956 FT7 Yao FT7

adjusts itself to the changes in its composition. At this point I wish only to indicate how the differentiation among the various segments of a matrilineage is reflected in the way the members site their huts in a village.

The Segmentary Process

The segmentary tendencies within the lineage are countered by unifying forces, but the cleavages between the lineage sections show up at the slightest provocation. Once the cleavage starts it widens rapidly and charges of sorcery become more and more frequent between the two sections until eventually one moves out to found a new village. A cleavage of this type has been developing in Cikoja village for the last eight years. When I left the field in 1949, talk of migration was in the air but it had not yet happened. I summarize the major events which led to the present situation.

The cleavage first manifested itself in 1942 when Bt. Mbwana (F2) [1] fought with her mother's younger 'sister' Ayesi (E8). These two were pounding at the same place in the village and Bt. Mbwana took Ayesi's flat sifting basket. She retained it for about four days without telling Ayesi that she had it. One day Ayesi saw it at the pounding point and asked Bt. Mbwana where she got it. They had a few words about it and Bt. Mbwana returned it and thought no more of it. She was pregnant at the time and was confined about a month later. It was her fifth child but she had a greatly prolonged labour. After labour had been going on for some hours, Cilimba (F1), her eldest brother, thought that there must be something wrong and sent his two younger brothers, Kausi (F3) and Gwili (F4) to a diviner. The diviner indicated that the cause of the difficult birth was that her 'younger mother' Ayesi was bearing her malice,[2] and advised that Ayesi should blow water from her mouth and declare that she bore no malice. Kausi and Gwili returned and went to Bt. Amisa (E4) who was Ayesi's elder sister and told her what the diviner had said. Bt. Amisa did as she was advised and fetched Ayesi to the door of the hut in which Bt. Mbwana was lying, and made her confess. The child was born immediately. After a week Cilimba and Kausi brought a complaint to the village headman Cikoja (E7). They accused Ayesi of trying to kill their sister. Cikoja sent a message to

[1] The reference numbers refer to the genealogy in Appendix D.

[2] Difficult labour is usually assumed to be due to adultery, but it may also be due to sorcery or malice. See p. 138, and Chap. VII, p. 185.

2: Mitchell E-5 (1946-1949) 1956 FT7 Yao FT7

his eldest uterine sister's first-born and second-born sons, Amidu (F18) and Kanyenga (F19), to advise them of this dispute, and told them that they would have to assume responsibility for the actions of their mother's younger sister, Ayesi. At the same time he sent to a neighbouring village to call in an unrelated man to act as arbitrator in the dispute. There was much argument and eventually the arbitrator awarded 15*s.* to be paid by Cikoja as leader of the junior lineage section to Cilimba as leader of the senior section. Amidu and Kanyenga found 10*s.* between them and gave it to Cikoja to give to Cilimba. The other 5*s.* they said they would try to find and pay later.

This payment formally settled the dispute but the tension was near to the surface. Amidu and Kanyenga said that there was separation in the group now that they had started to eat money. They were not wrong. Ayesi was pregnant and near to confinement. When she was confined her labour was as difficult as Bt. Mbwana's (it was also her fifth confinement). When her birthpang confessions seemed to be unavailing Bt. Bwana Isa (F16), her elder sister's daughter, went to Kanyenga to tell him that their 'younger mother' was having a difficult childbirth. Kanyenga remarked that she had had many children before and had not suffered, so that there must be some reason for her difficulty. Then Kanyenga and his sister went to Ayesi's husband's sister's hut[1] to find a representative to go with them to a diviner. When they got there Ayesi's husband's sister told her son to accompany her brother's wife's representative to the diviner. The diviner indicated that the cause of the prolonged birth was the malice felt by Bt. Mbwana because the rest of the compensation awarded had not yet been paid. He said that the only thing to do was to call Bt. Mbwana and to get her to blow water from her mouth at the hut door where Ayesi was confined. Bt. Amisa went to find Bt. Mbwana and made her do this. Immediately Ayesi delivered a stillborn child.

The next morning Amidu and Kanyenga went to Cikoja and blamed him for the stillborn child.[2] Cikoja called Cilimba to listen to the complaint. Ayesi was inconsolable. She said that she had blown water for the sake of Bt. Mbwana who to-day had a child, whereas she was mourning her child. Once again Cikoja called in outsiders to act as arbitrators and the members of the two segments gathered to settle the dispute. At the end of protracted wrangling

[1] Ayesi was married to her MMMBD5 (Kasoli (D33)), whose lineage lived in another part of the same village. See genealogy and hut count in Appendix D.

[2] Cikoja is a representative of his lineage even to the lineage members. This accusation simply means that the blame lies within the lineage.

2: Mitchell E-5 (1946-1949) 1956 FT7 Yao FT7

the arbitrators awarded 30s. compensation to be paid by Cilimba to Cikoja, less 5s. owing. This money was to be paid to Ayesi in compensation for the loss of her baby. Ayesi, however, refused to accept the money because she said she wanted to have her baby. The matter now became an intra-segment affair and Cikoja, Amidu, Kanyenga and Kaifa (F36), the son of Ayesi, with Bt. Amisa had a meeting on what to do. Ayesi was quite adamant about it. There was nothing to do but to drop the matter, and the state of tension between the segments remained as it was before.

The next incident occurred in 1943. Mpulula, the husband of Bt. Amisa, had some goats. One day two of them strayed on to the verandah of Bt. Madi's hut. Bt. Madi (F10) was the daughter of Asuna (F2) and a member of the senior lineage segment. One of the goats nosed its way into a basket of flour that was lying under the verandah and started to eat it. Bt. Madi came out and picked up a log that was lying nearby and threw it at the goat. It broke the goat's leg and the goat had to be destroyed. The owner, Mpulula, who was watching at that moment immediately rebuked the woman. He went and reported the matter to Cikoja and he sent a message to Mpulula's marriage surety who sent back to say that they would meet at Chiwalo's hut the following morning. The arbitrator in the case finally decided that the correct action should have been to take the goat to the owner and to lay a complaint against him. As it was he had to award compensation of 30s. to be paid to the owner of the goat. Mpulula, however, refused to take the money. He argued that although the goat was his, so was the offender.[1] He said that he was afraid of sorcery so he would take a token amount of 3s. only. Cikoja gave him this.[2]

A few months later the eldest child of Bt. Bwana Isa (F16) suddenly fell ill and died.[3] Kanyenga, Kaifa and Mauta went to the diviner. Kaifa, the son of Ayesi, went as the headman's representative. Kanyenga went as the warden of the sorority-group, i.e. the child's mother's brother. Mauta was the marriage surety of the child's father. Kanyenga consulted the diviner who indicated that Kanyenga's mother Bt. Amina was responsible but that she was not a sorceress. Sorcery, he said, was introduced by an unknown person who was using Bt. Amina's grumbling as a screen. Kanyenga refused to accept the finding of the diviner, saying that his mother had never been 'caught'

[1] His wife's collateral sister's child he also calls 'my child'.

[2] Mpulula is a stranger in the village and in this situation Cikoja represents both segments to Mpulula, even though the senior segment is guilty.

[3] Sudden illness, called *chisese* or 'the hammer', is believed to be without a doubt due to sorcery.

2: Mitchell E-5 (1946-1949) 1956 FT7 Yao FT7

rationalized in the Yao theory of conception.[1] They believe that after intercourse the semen clots and embeds itself in the womb. From this the child develops and is nurtured by the mother until it is due to be born. Subsequent acts of intercourse add semen to the body of the child and make it fat. Semen from other men may be used, too, to feed the child in its intra-uterine life, but its body and blood are derived from the semen which first clotted. In Yao opinion there can be one father only.

Not all acts of intercourse lead to impregnation because sometimes, for various reasons, especially in immature women, the semen fails to clot. There is therefore, to the Yao way of thinking, some difficulty in determining the 'father' of a child. This difficulty is met by the belief that the intra-uterine child in some way knows about the doings of its parents and in particular knows who its father is. It therefore refuses to be born unless its father is recognized.[2] Hence if a child is born without undue puerperal complications it is assumed to be the offspring of the man who is currently living with its mother. If labour is prolonged, however, the relatives call for confessions (*kupara*) from both husband and wife. The husband's confessions are usually formal and simple. The wife's confessions on the other hand are detailed and complete. She confesses the name of an adulterer, and her midwives, including the husband's sisters as his witnesses, wait for the next birth-spasm. If the child is not born at this spasm she is told to confess again. Only after she has confessed to a lover whom the Yao assume to be the genitor will the child eventually be born. After this the aggrieved husband summons the adulterer to court and he is made to accept the fatherhood of the child.

The act of formally accepting the paternity of a child, which is also done when a woman has a child out of wedlock, confers rights of two types on the child. The first set of rights is directly economic and physical. The father is expected to give the mother salt, money for relish, and cloth to help her rear the child. But this side of a father's duties to his child ceases as soon as another man marries the woman. The new husband then takes over the

[1] I have dealt with this more fully in *Marriage among the Machinga Yao*.

[2] It also refuses to be born for other reasons, but the first considered is always the adultery of its parents. See p. 138.

or a girl who has just returned from Chipute must not touch the child, as it is said, "Her body is hot and would give fever to the child." To guard against such a happening, some "alosa" woman, after handing some beads to the mother, will ask to be allowed to take the infant. This indicates that should it sicken, the beads will pay the medicine-woman who comes to cure it. The mother and baby are simply washed in water and are not treated with medicine, unless meconium has been voided before the child was delivered.[1] If the infant dies before it is presented to the outside world, it is disposed of in the same way as a stillborn child, i.e. buried in the ash-heap. About the tenth day, the baby is adorned with a girdle of beads and two little pieces of stick obtained from a medicine-woman to make the infant grow fat.

The length of time during which the father and mother refrain from cohabitation after the birth of a baby varies greatly according to circumstances. Four months is probably a minimum, while two years, during which the woman suckles the child, is the common interval. After the first coitus, the man and woman wash themselves and the baby is bathed in the same water to prevent any ill coming to it.

Suckling often continues much longer than two years. If the mother dies, the child may be suckled by the grandmother, an aunt, or some other woman, but the breasts must first be treated with medicine or the child would die.

A child born breech first is called *mlongo*, a word which is also used to denote a variety of domestic fowl which always has the appearance of having its feathers ruffled. A child who dies before the father and mother have resumed sexual relations is buried in a grave-yard apart from that of adults. The grave, dug with sticks, not hoes, is very shallow, and when it is filled in, a heap of stones is made above it. Only women attend the burial. A deep grave would cause the mother to go on losing children at an early age. The body of such a child is called *litawa*, "hyæna."

A woman dying undelivered is placed in the grave in the usual way and then, before filling in the earth, one of the grave-diggers descends into the pit, cuts through the enveloping shroud, and incises the abdomen. One end of a long bamboo stick or reed is inserted in the incision and the other end is brought out to the surface of the grave. If this were not done, "many would die in childbirth."

Twins are not killed by the Yao but are well treated and always cared for equally. They are given similar clothing and food.[2] There is a story that the mother of Nkwambe,

[1] *Chinyanja, vide infra*, p. 266.

[2] H. S. Warner, "Among the Congo Cannibals, by John H. Weeks, London, 1913, a review," (*Man*, vol. 14, no. 58, 1914, p. 102).

I take this opportunity of referring to Miss Warner's review in which, speaking of twins, she says, "They are always among the Anyanja given the names *Mapiri* and *Kyamo*." *Mapiri* in Chinyanja refers to a kind of musical instrument and the Chinyao meaning is "unmusical pedal." *Kyamo* is a Chinyao word which certainly means "the limb." It is sometimes used of the second born twin but does not occur in Chinyanja. I have never heard of twins either among the Wayao or the Anyanja speakers of by these names. A mother carries the first born on the right arm and the second born on the left, but, so far as I know, she does not give a duplicate greeting nor make a habit of waving equally with both hands.

3: Stannus D-5 (ca. 1912) 1922 FT7 Yao FT7

one of Malenya's men died, after giving birth to quintuplets, some thirty years ago. Deformed children are buried alive. A large number of children is always hoped for and where polygamy is practised, some families are of considerable size, although the mortality among young children is very high. It is, of course, very difficult to state the child-bearing period among natives. It does not start so early as is commonly supposed, and I think the menopause is found within about the same limits as among Europeans.

Death. Natives of Nyasaland live to a good old age. That such is not the case I have found to be one of the many fallacious beliefs concerning natives which should be relegated to the realm of exploded theories, as I have pointed out elsewhere.[1]

Death in old age is recognized as a natural event but apart from this, all sickness and death were formerly and are still to a large extent looked upon as the result of the machinations of some person, an idea which forms the outstanding feature in their belief in witchcraft, vanui.[2]

Here I shall mention the ordinary customs in the case of death. During the last hours of a mortal illness, a man is tended by his wife or wives; the head wife sits constantly supporting his head on her lap or against her breast. A woman is similarly tended by her mother, sisters, and friends. As unconsciousness sets in and the extremities become cold, they say, "His spirit has gone and only the heart remains alive."

The native does not like the idea of lingering on and a man on his death-bed will say to his sons, "Now watch me that I die quickly." He may take medicine to help him over that time or he may give his sons instructions as to what to do. Should a man linger unconscious for a long time, friends will ask his sons, "Did he give you any instructions?" If he has done so, the sons will then carry them out. This perhaps consists of bathing themselves in medicines left by their father, while they stand on the roof of his house. Sometimes, the natives say of a lingering case, "Ah, perhaps he has eaten of a tortoise's heart!" knowing the phenomenon of the tortoise's heart and believing that by partaking of it, the same property can be conferred on the heart of a man.

When death is manifest, the body is covered with a cloth by a brother, a son, or some other person in attendance. The eyes are closed, the mouth shut, and at the present time, the body straightened out. This, however, is a recent practice copied from the Anyanja, Europeans, and Mohammedans.

News of the death must be sent to the chief, and a messenger goes to his village where the chief and his people sit in the village open space. He carries a fowl in his hand. The present of a single fowl always denotes bad tidings. One of the chief's men, seeing the stranger approach with the single fowl, will jump up and take the bird. He is joined by the others and they go away to the cross-roads where they kill the fowl, pluck it, cook it and eat it. In the meantime, the messenger delivers his news to the chief who will produce from his house about eight yards of white calico; if the deceased has been a much respected

[1] Hugh S. Stannus, "The life-span of negroes", (*Lancet*, April 15, 1916, p. 1022). [2] Vide infra, p. 266.

3: Stanmus D-5 (ca. 1912) 1922 FT7 Yao FT7

775 setting out on a journey may ask the intercession of his deceased father to assure his safe conduct.

The spirits of the dead are in general said to dwell "above." They haunt the graveyard or visit the scenes of their life, and may be associated with natural objects or with certain animals, into which they are supposed to enter temporarily. Thus a dead man's spirit will visit the earth mound which marks the site of his old house in the village. The spirits of headmen are often thought to haunt the big trees of the village open space; such trees are held sacred for this reason. Some time ago in the old village of the chief, Malemya, a party of women cut down one of these trees for firewood, ignorant of its sacred character. With the crash of the falling tree, they became frightened, and one of the present Malemya's wives came upon the scene, predicting all kinds of evil to follow unless reparation were made to the insulted spirits of the dead chiefs. The remains of the tree lie there to this day, untouched except by natural decay.

To quote another example, near a bathing pool called *jopuuli* (*from ku-jopa*, to bathe, and *wuli*, the initiates) where boys bathe after initiation, on the Domasi river, there is a small cataract whence a cloud of spray rises and a continued rumbling sound comes forth. Here, the old men say, you can hear the drumming of the spirits, while you may see pythons and the crowing cobra in whose bodies the spirits live.

As I have already mentioned, the spirit-world so far as the native has speculated on the problem is "above" in a semi-materialistic heaven. If questioned closely, the phrase "I do not know" will figure largely in his replies. He will not say there is any "*marriage or giving in marriage.*" If a child dies, they often say, "So-and-so (some deceased person) wants a *water-carrier.*" Indeed they often use a phrase under the circumstances identical with an English expression, "They are calling *away* the children."

Natives attribute to the spirits of the dead the power to partake of anything on this earth, such as food. They have no exact ideas with regard to animals and what happens to them when they die. They will not tell you that an animal has an *mzimu* but at the same [825] time, a goat is often killed at a funeral, with the remark, "The goat will follow the dead man." The goat's meat will be eaten by those assisting at the funeral; hence there is the suggestion of the idea that animals' spirits do go to the spirit-world.

776 In referring to the spirit-world, the native generally uses the word *ku-mulungu*, and here we have the second element in their religious beliefs, namely a supreme being; *ku-mulungu* means at the place of or with *mulungu*, the supreme being. *Mulungu*, however, [845] takes a very secondary place to the *mzimu*. He is referred to only in a general way. In answer to such questions as why has a woman an albino child born to her, she will say "*Mulungu* made it so"; in fact in reply to many questions to which the native has no answer, he will use practically our English phrase, "Oh, God knows!" and with about as much meaning.

To *Mulungu* is ascribed the sending of the rain, but apparently he has no part in giving good crops or causing a plentiful harvest, neither has he any direct interest in man's affairs,

ndembo, a woman who is pregnant for the first time;[1] *kavwiberi*, a woman who has one or two children; *mjiwiberi*, a woman who has three or four children, and lastly, *akalwa*, a woman who is past child-bearing age.

The information which I have been able to collect on abortifacients and contraceptives suggests that they are not used by married people merely to prevent their having more children, but that they are used by people who wish to avoid pregnancies which would be embarrassing, for example, by a woman whose husband is a labour migrant. To what extent the abortifacients and contraceptives are efficacious I cannot say; some, I know for certain, rely on a magical principle, for example, the medicated cord worn by a man during intercourse. On the other hand, the abortifacients taken orally may have some active ingredient.

A barren woman or an impotent man is regarded with some embarrassment and the marriage sureties (*ariamangwaw*) of a childless couple will go to considerable trouble and expense consulting diviners and leeches in an attempt to make their wards productive. Childless couples are regarded as not fully adult and are treated in a patronizing way by those who have borne children. Since a man may marry other wives, barrenness in a woman is a cause of sorrow to her husband, but is not in itself a ground for divorce. Where the man is impotent, however, the woman may divorce him on this ground, though she usually takes a paramour and forces her husband to an action for damages which automatically leads to a divorce because it is the usual practice in these cases for the court to ask the woman if she wants to be divorced from her husband.

In contrast to the satisfaction shown at the birth of a child is the sense of awe evinced when a child is still-born or the woman miscarries. The Yao do not distinguish between still-births and abortions, both events being known by the word *kwasanga*. This is a verb and refers to the process of abortion; there is no term for the dead foetus itself. I made no attempt to enumerate miscarriages and still-births because they are supposed to be due to breaches of sexual taboos on the part of the husband and wife, and interviewees were naturally reluctant to mention them. Miscarriages and still-births are greatly feared, and the woman is considered to be in a very dangerous condition until she and her husband have carried out a ritual purification. Should a man have intercourse with a woman who has miscarried and not yet been purified he will contract a disease called *kwao* which is believed to be invariably fatal. Still-born children or aborted foetuses are buried in a hole dug with sharpened sticks in the bush by the women, whereas children who are born alive and die afterwards are buried in the graveyard in graves dug by men with hoes. The burial spots of still-born babies or aborted foetuses are marked with a stone or broken pottery, since it is believed that to step on them will induce an illness.

The concern of the interested kin-groups is shown in the child-birth procedure. Birth normally takes place in a hut in the presence of the older female relatives of the woman and the female representatives of the man. The husband's representatives are necessary because the Yao, like many other Central African peoples, believe that an adulterine child will not be born to the woman unless she confesses (*kupaya*) the name of the genitor. If she persists in concealing the identity of the genitor, they

[1] *ndembo* = elephant, hence ivory. The terms *ditidu* and *ndembo* here both refer to the ivory bands traditionally worn by the women in the pregnancy initiation ceremony.